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CARLEA HOLL-JENSEN

May Queen

Our mothers remind us it is not the worst thing to be ugly. In the morning, they kiss us and say their goodbyes. The lovelier among us are wept over, just in case. The plain, the pockmarked, the unsymmetrical have, at least, the hope of someday growing into our features or finally learning how to properly style our hair. The truly pitiable ones are those handsome girls who will live out the rest of their days knowing they weren't quite beautiful enough. And yet, each of us can't help thinking—*It could be me, it could be me.*

Our mothers don't make us bring our lunches or our books today. We walk to school unencumbered, ascending the hills like larks climbing into the sky.

Already the town is waking up. Tourists take guided walks along the cliffs, snapping pictures of the people who have gathered there to pray and weave flower garlands. Then they stop for lunch downtown and spend the afternoon wandering in packs along the sidewalks, eating ice cream and buying commemorative key chains. Stalls have cropped up on street corners selling candied violets and little slips of escarole filled with cheese and fruit. The smell of chicory coffee hangs in the air alongside the bite of spring.

In class, we sit primly at our desks, backs straight, hands clasped, waiting for the announcement to come over the loudspeaker. When our names are called, we file in an orderly fashion toward the exits. Our classmates watch in silence, looking hard. Even the most invisible girl is recognized, if only for a moment.

We ride in a van with its windows blacked out. Every judder over every pothole is magnified. Time seems to stretch out, though the journey is not far. Nobody quite looks anybody else in the eye. We are not competitors, but neither are we friends.

There are twelve of us this year, all girls freshly in our blood. The

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oldest is seventeen, a senior. The youngest is eight or nine, and she is crying. We can all see she has nothing to worry about, but nobody has the heart to tell her. Let her cry. Let her hope, for now.

When we arrive, we are ushered out of the van and along a vaulted walkway. Inside, we are made to strip out of our school clothes and directed to a large, tiled room, where we wash ourselves in silver tubs of lavender and milk. Scrub hard, we are told. We use coarse brushes to scrape the old skin from our knuckles and the spaces between our fingers, our wrists and elbows and armpits. When we are clean, we are given robes made from rose-colored silk so fine it is almost breath itself.

From now until May Morning, we are told, our days will be devoted to quiet study and preparation. In the mornings, we will learn the histories of the girls who have come before us, memorizing each of their names and ages and lineages as far back as they have been recorded, repeating them until we can recite them in order without drawing a breath. The afternoons will be spent learning where to stand, how to walk—how to fall correctly, how to tie the knots. After the evening meal and an hour of silent prayer, we'll have two hours until lights out, which we may spend however we like.

By the end of our first night, we have almost stopped being surprised by the curl of silk against our ankles in a draft, by the touch of furniture too close to the backs of our thighs when we sit down. We have almost stopped looking at one another's near nakedness out of the corners of our eyes. The prettiest girls have already made their alliances and staked out the bench by the dormitory windows. One of them claims her boyfriend has promised to sneak in to see her; all the beautiful girls hang out by the windows, gossiping and watching the woods for some sign of him. A couple of girls perform the motions of prayer. The rest of us read or talk quietly or write letters to our parents that will not be delivered. At lights out, we scuttle into our beds and then the only sound is the slow undulating noise of all of us breathing together.

There is an art to falling well, we learn. A few years ago, one of the girls tripped. She went down hard on her knees right out there in front

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of everyone, projected fifty feet tall on the screens for the cheap seats. She wriggled around on the floor, trying to get her feet back under her, while the crowd held its breath. When she finally managed to get herself over the edge, you could hear a sigh of relief break across the crowd. No one wants a repeat of that disgrace, so we all study hard.

First we are tutored on the theory of falling. You must propel yourself correctly, pushing yourself away from the ledge, or else you will knock against the cliff face on the way down. But neither must you leap head-first like a diver. This isn't synchronized swimming, after all. There should be some dignity.

We practice falling from a raised platform onto a stack of blue foam pads like they use in gymnastics classes. Once, in our mothers' or their mothers' day, there was only a net to catch you at practice, but these days concessions have to be made out of concern for our safety. We stand in a line on the platform, just as we will on May Morning, and one by one we clasp our hands tightly behind our backs and practice walking to the edge of the stage. The five-foot drop is nothing compared to the real thing, but some of us still tremble and shake.

The rest of us are supposed to face forward when someone is practicing her jump, but it's hard to resist the temptation to turn around and look: to gauge the planes of someone's shoulders, to measure someone's stride. How does she bend her knees? Is she keeping her back straight?

The bindings are no easier. The knots are ornate and the silk cords slip in our fingers. We practice in pairs first, tying our partners' wrists, then letting them tie ours, so we can all learn how the pattern goes. Once we've got a handle on doing the knots ourselves, we have to practice tying the knots together. Our hands cramp quickly and our skin grows tender from the constant slide of the cords. We are given ointment to keep our skin from drying out, and some of the girls tear their pillowcases apart to wrap their hands overnight, so the ointment can sink in.

There have been many girls before us. This is what we learn. Many girls have stood where we will stand, and one has been chosen every year for as long as anyone can remember—longer, even, because no one knows

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anymore who the first girl was or how she came to be chosen. There has always been a May Queen. That is all anyone can say. The river below the cliffs is littered with the bones of the girls who have jumped before.

We can see the floodlights of the stadium from the dormitory windows. They are lit at all hours while the risers and barriers and stage go up. They glow crystal white, irradiating the sky.

In town, people have started celebrating. Every table in the city is laden with all the good early spring foods: braised asparagus and salads of strawberry and spinach, gooseberries in cream. At home, our parents are getting drunk on elderflower cordial, only this year we're not at home to watch. We can hear the revelers singing in the streets. Their voices bend and dip, warped by distance and geography, an underwater sound.

What are we supposed to pray for during silent prayer hour? one of us asks during our morning lessons.

We are told it doesn't matter. We can bow our heads and sit in silence if we like, so that's what we do.

The boyfriend who was supposed to sneak in never comes. The prettiest girls are growing tired of talking about themselves to one another. The food is not as good as you might expect and we grow homesick for our mothers' radish mousses and rhubarb custards, all the delicacies of the season we are missing. We have memorized the May Queens' names and can tie the bindings with our eyes closed. In the hours between supper and lights out, we lean our chins in our hands, swinging our legs in our chairs.

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On the last night of April, someone keeps us all up with her crying. It's impossible to tell who, because any time one of us gets out of bed to investigate the noise stops.

Crying will make your eyes puffy, someone reminds us in the dark.

Don't worry, someone else says, as if this weren't cruel enough. *Tomorrow you'll be home.*

We are woken early. It's practically night. We bathe and rub ourselves all over with sweet oil, the only barrier there will be between our skin and the sky. Then our hair is combed and twisted and pinned into ornate plaits threaded with roses pink as sugar candy. We pinch our cheeks until they sting and bite our lips to bring blood up just beneath the skin. We admire ourselves in the mirror, giddy with our beauty, our promise. Even the plainest of us looks a little special today.

In the van on the way to the cliffs, we lean on each other, still sleepy despite our excitement. We must be careful not to let the vinyl seats leave unsightly creases on the backs of our thighs.

The crowds scream when they see us arrive. They press against the temporary barricades, reaching out their arms to us as one.

Dawn breaks as we file onto the stage. We stand in our straight line like we've been taught, bare in the clear morning light, and try not to search for our mothers and brothers and friends.

Silence falls over the crowd when the music starts, a hush that lets us know we are coming to the end of possibility—that we are about to lose forever even the smallest hope that we might be *her*, that we might be the May Queen. The moment is almost here when our little group will be cleaved in two: one who was beautiful enough and eleven who remain.

Orations are made, praising our precious traditions and the impeccable beauty of May Queens past. Prayers are offered. We've heard these words every year, but this year we cannot hear anything over the rush of blood in our ears. We must not scratch the itches that arise under our skin, must not shift our weight, must hold our heads up high and our shoulders straight. Perhaps if we perform well enough, it will make a difference.

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We think—

Let it me be.

And, *Let it be me.*

And, *If it's not me, let me be struck by lightning or run down in the street so I don't have to remember the moment it was not me.*

And then, at last, she is chosen: the May Queen.

She is radiant. She is perfect. There is no denying she is the best of us. We were blind not to see it before. It's so obvious now: how much lovelier she is than the rest of us, how much more serene. How could any of us have hoped, even for a second, that it could be anyone but her?

We break formation to bind her, our eleven pairs of hands working together to twist the cords. Up close, we notice she has a hangnail on the index finger of her left hand, the cuticle a raw, red fringe. We feel her breathing as the slow expansion and contraction of her ribs between us. She is not the one shaking. Someone's hands slip on the cords, despite all our training. The tremor is contagious. By the time we resume our line, we are all trembling as if we've run laps.

By now she has appeared on the big screen and for a moment, we are all transfixed by her image, even her: the azure sky behind her, the air around her almost pink. Her eyes, narrowed against the bright sun, like colorless cuts across her face. Her neck, long and bowing under the weight of all the flowers in her hair. Round shoulders giving way to plump upper arms. Her nipples are wide and dark, her breasts small. Thighs tensed, toes curled.

For one breathless moment, it almost seems she is about to run. Finally, she turns on the ball of her foot and walks with measured steps to the far edge of the platform. What perfect posture, what a graceful gait. The camera tracks her movements lovingly and the muscles of our necks ache to turn. We aren't supposed to look, but we can't resist. We have to see. Her knees bend, hamstrings standing out under her skin. She dips and rises and then is gone.

On the big screen, the camera transmits her descent. She turns head over feet, head over feet, until she disappears under the water. It shivers to accept her.

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After the ceremony is over, we who remain climb down from the platform on shaky legs and wade into the crowd to find our families. Tourists and worshippers alike bow to us, clasp our hands, kiss our feet. Our parents, when we find them, pat us on the backs and kiss our cheeks, congratulating us the way they do after recitals and school plays. We have done well, they tell us. They do their best not to betray their disappointment we have returned to them. They love us anyway. At home, there will be yellow roses and baskets of sweets waiting for us.

When we first return to school, our friends and classmates will beg us to tell them all about the ceremony, all about the May Queen. Some of us will speak, breathless, of her beauty and grace. Others will affect a callous attitude and shrug and say, *She wasn't anything special, really.* A few of us will invent rumors about her—a sordid home life, a tragic love waiting for her return. We will delight in the attention, but after a few weeks, our classmates will tire of quizzing us about the ceremony, and we'll be absorbed in catching up on the schoolwork we missed, with the end of the semester and the arrival of summer, and before long, we will forget there was ever a time, even if only a moment, when we dared to believe we could have been the May Queen.

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